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SUBJECT: EMBASSY SUPPORT FOR WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (U) While freedom of the press is currently a highly sensitive issue in Afghanistan, World Press Freedom Day provided the opportunity for Embassy Kabul to go on the record supporting media freedoms in Afghanistan. The Ambassador released a press statement on the issue, and the DCM attended a workshop for members of Parliament and journalists that included several high level GOA and international community officials. Interestingly, the controversial Minister of Information himself handed out certificates honoring courageous journalists to some of the very journalists who are criticizing him. End summary.

AMBASSADOR WOOD ISSUES PRESS RELEASE

[1](#)2. (U) On May 3, the Embassy issued the following statement by the Ambassador on the issue of media freedoms in Afghanistan. The statement, which was also posted on the Embassy's public website, received limited coverage in the Afghan print and electronic media due to several high profile security incidents, including the assassination of a Senator and a bomb attack against an ANP bus, that captured significant media coverage during the day. The statement was read aloud by the Afghan master of ceremonies at the May 3 World Press Freedom Day event (para 4).

[1](#)3. (U) Begin text: On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, I would like to underscore U.S. support for a free media around the world. The free and open exchange of ideas is the foundation of accountable governance. On World Press Freedom Day, we remember and mourn all of the journalists who have lost their lives in Afghanistan this past year. We will continue to support the Government of Afghanistan, journalists and civil society as they work together to foster a

free and vibrant Afghan media. End text.

EMBASSY SIGNALS SUPPORT AT SEMINAR ON PRESS FREEDOM

14. (U) The same day the DCM and human rights officer attended a seminar on media freedoms attended by about 150 members of Parliament, journalists, diplomats and NGO's. The seminar was organized by Internews, a media lobbying NGO, whose advocacy activities for freedom of the press in Afghanistan are partially funded by USAID. Parliamentarians who attended the seminar included members of Parliament's Commission on Religious and Cultural Affairs, which is responsible for drafting amendments to the Media Law currently being debated in Parliament.

15. (U) Vice President Khalili and Minister of Information and Culture Khuram both gave remarks at the seminar. Both speakers asserted the GOA's commitment to ensuring freedom of the press in Afghanistan, with Khalili describing it as "a gift from God," but both also spoke about the need for an Afghan media that is "more professional" and that "respects Islam and Allah." VP Khalili specifically noted that the significant gains in freedom of the press since the fall of the Taliban should be credited to the GOA, which he said was committed to the further expansion of "information dissemination throughout Afghanistan."

16. (U) Minister of Information Khuram acknowledged that, "If there is no free media, democracy cannot be achieved," and that, "Criticism of the government

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plays a key role in correcting the government." However, he was careful to add that, "If we do not regulate this freedom, it will explode and the country will suffer." He then criticized the media, noting that its professional capacity needs to be increased in order to "avoid misunderstandings" (an indirect, yet clear reference to the recent incident between Tolo TV and Attorney General Sabit; reftel B). Noting that "The news is now a source of power," Khuram likened it to "an armed group with a different appearance" and criticized the media community as having many unprofessional journalists who have not had proper education in journalism or who are unfamiliar with the laws regulating media activity.

17. (U) Other speakers included chiefs of mission from the EU and EC (both of whom criticized the Parliament's recent decision not to convert Radio Television Afghanistan from a state-run media outlet into an independent public service broadcaster) and the Canadian Ambassador. Copies of the U.S. Ambassador's press release were distributed during the seminar. During the seminar, several journalists were presented awards by VP Khalili and Minister Khuram, including one that was given posthumously to Ajmal Naqshbandi, the journalist recently executed by the Taliban. Khalili and Khuram also presented awards to two journalists who were being recognized for bravery in the face of allegedly being beaten by Afghan security officials and the other for allegedly being imprisoned by the GOA for having contact with Taliban officials. (Note: It is unclear whether Khalili and Khuram had been briefed on who they would be issuing the awards to beforehand or whether they were aware of the irony of having such awards presented by the GOA. End note.)

18. Comment: The event was an important occasion for the journalistic community to lay down a marker that press freedom is an international issue and how it plays out in Afghanistan is being monitored both

inside and outside the country. At the same time, governmental spokesmen such as Minister Khoram, as well as media representatives themselves, were forced to confront the tensions between the value of a free media and the exigencies of fighting an insurgency. The result was one day of healthy dialogue on these important issues.

WOOD